

NAME

Sunday Service I Am Not Your Negro Documentary, June 21, 2020.mp3

DATE

June 23, 2020

DURATION

25m

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

[00:00:07]

Hi, everybody. Good to be with you again. Some of you know I'm a really big baseball fan and I've been missing the fact that there hasn't been to this point any Major League Baseball played here in the United States. And in fact, the prospect of there being a season, I think got even a little further away from us today, the day that I'm recording this message when it is reported that five members of the Phillies organization tested positive for Covid 19. I think that will only complicate the prospects of their being Major League Baseball here in the U.S. this year.

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Now, if there isn't any baseball, I'll miss it, but I'll actually miss it less than I would have thought. But I'll tell you why that is.

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Later on in this message, I bring up baseball as well to share a story with you, a brief story that about two decades ago I was at a baseball game. This is something I've done hundreds of times in my life. Major League Baseball, minor league baseball, college games, Little League. I've gone to a lot of baseball games. And before this particular game began, before the first pitch, there was a presentation, kind of a remembrance of the Negro Leagues, the all black professional American Baseball League that sprung up because Major League Baseball. Was segregated by race and only whites could play. And during this presentation, which was really good and really valuable, and this is before the Negro Leagues really started to come into a wider sense of public prominence. And so I thought the the club that was offering this was really offering a really important service to the fans there. And about halfway through the presentation, there was a guy, a white guy a couple rows in front of me and is a little bit to the right of me who said very loudly and with a real tone of anger, almost offense in his voice. I didn't come for a history lesson. And you felt everyone kind of stiffened around us. And when I look back on my own actions or lack there of I had a thought in my head that I wished I would have said, what exactly do you mean by that? But I didn't say anything kind of frozen. And so the truth is, is actually even more than what he said. What sticks with me is what I did not say in that moment. Today's SpiritFlix message is all about those moments in our lives, particularly with regard to race and racism and white supremacy.

[00:02:55]

When we learn about perhaps the hidden histories or the histories of those of us who are part of the dominant racial group in this country, those of us with white skin, we encounter those histories, those stories that we just did not know or chose not to pay attention to. It is about how we can turn towards and engage those moments, especially most importantly, if they make us uncomfortable. So this SpiritFlix movie, this documentary, I am not your Negro. It's based on an unfinished book from the late, truly great James Baldwin, the author. And in it, he writes about four friends, fellow activists, people he wrote about who all died before the age of 40. Lorraine Hansberry, the great playwright, author of A Raisin in the Sun. Medgar Evers. The one time head of the NAACP in Mississippi and Malcolm X and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., all of whom dead before the age of 40. The title I Am Not Your Negro is taken from a quote that is played at the end of this movie, an actual recording of an interview with James Baldwin. That's what this movie is. It's some of his words read by a narrator, Samuel Jackson, and then also some of his words and his speeches and his interviews played from videotape. And in this clip, he says, I am not your N-word. He's addressing white folks here, addressing people like me, even if I wasn't alive at the time. Still incredibly important question. I am not your N-word. And yet you felt it was necessary to invent me.

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This is the question that James Baldwin posed to whites.

[00:05:11]

Why did you need to invent me to create your own power? And in so doing, subjugate me and my people for centuries. James Baldwin was a part of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and in the 1960s, which focused most of it, not all of it, but most of it on voting rights and access to public goods, services and spaces. A lot of it focused on integration. And in this documentary, James Baldwin asks us a deeper question about integration. It is about that moment that that white baseball fan years ago rejected the question of integration and the psychological, almost spiritual way.

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How do we deal with the true history of this country, if most that history we did not learn or was hidden from us?

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What happens at those moments?

[00:06:11]

Do we open up to it? Do we get uncomfortable?

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Do we grow beyond it into a larger story and help to create a larger story? Or do we just double down? On our rejection of what we don't like to hear. There's a quote in the movie also played from a clip from James Baldwin in which he said, Whites got this need in this country and need to believe we are good. And he said the thing is that the lived experience of centuries of black people in this country holds up a mirror to white people.

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And he said most white people, when we have to look at it, we don't feel good about ourselves. And what we do, what many of us end up doing.

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Is we reject the lived experience of black folks rather than engaging that deeper discomfort. At least historically, that has very much been true. I mean, you see it in the documentary when there's a white liberal, a white progressive who is interviewing James Baldwin. Then he asks, well, what about the progress we've made in this country? This interview appears to be like in the early 60s. And they're also there already had been some kind of desegregation efforts that had been moderately successful. But what about progress? And you can see James Baldwin kind of see what's behind that question, this need to cling to. Are we good now? I don't want to diminish progress in this country. It has been meaningful. But I also want to go back to what Malcolm X, one of the people who James Baldwin wrote so much about when he said, if you stick a knife in my back nine inches in and you take it six inches out and it is still in there for three inches, you can't really call that progress.

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That's the challenge, the necessary soulful historical, political, psychological challenge of this movie. And it is so vital right now at this moment of being alive.

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The way that I took this movie, the central question that stayed with me when I thought in my head is that it's only after we demythologize something or someone that mythology of the stories about them, but not the real reality of their lives or a country's lives.

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It's only after we demythologize something that we can only finally tell if that's something or that someone is worthy of our love and our devotion. Here's the thing, demythologizing is a disruptive process, and I would say all of the social movements of this time, including particularly right now, Black Lives Matter.

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Are about inviting us to move beyond the mythology and into the reality of our lives. Demythologizing something or someone is disruptive can only see the responses. At least when it first started happening a number of years ago. Colin Kaepernick. Back to the sports world. Who took that knee? He first the courageous one to do so. And how he was drummed out of the league. And the truth is, there were others before him in other leagues who tried to call attention to that vast gulf between the aspirations of this country and the reality of this country, particularly when it came to the violence that is visited upon the lives and bodies of black and brown people. And Colin Kaepernick, like many before him, was drummed out of the league. Now, maybe we're listening to him, but not all of us believe there was a commentator, I think, on Fox News not too long ago, who when LeBron James started to raise his profile and his voice in terms of speaking to what's happening right now, said the equivalent of essentially shut up and dribble. And I think there's one word left off of that historically that would have been said in the past.

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Shut up. And dribble N-word. The fact that it wasn't said here now doesn't mean that there wasn't some of that same energy behind it. These moments when we are confronted by all the uncomfortable truths about our culture and its history, particularly about racism and oppression and white supremacy. This is what James Baldwin in his beautiful, lyrical, hopeful but rigorously honest way of calling us to account. This is what he invited us to do. And

this is why his voice is just as vital. After his death as it was during his life. For those of us who are white, many of us are recognizing that this moment is a moment to wake up and stay awake, stay connected, stay doing the work and not shut down. Robin D'Angelo is the author of a book that some of you have read, some of you've worked with. It's a very powerful called Right white fragility. And she said that too often in this country, what happens is many white folks, the majority of white folks.

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Want to think of racism as something done by unkind individuals rather than a system. A system that diminishes black lives through policing. But not just policing, medicine and law and the criminal justice system and mental health. Spiritual communities. And that it shows up generation after generation as racialized trauma.

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Now, this moment is a powerful moment, something does seem to be stirring and not immediately dying out and not just moving on. And what I truly do believe in this moment is that part of the energy, the soul or even the ghost of James Baldwin's life is encouraging us. Encouraging us to sustain that moral courage to finally take the inventory of this country. One of the ways that I'd like to do this is recognizing when I start to feel shut down or overwhelmed. When I feel like maybe I don't have what it takes to do it, and by the way, I think it's good to get in touch with that vulnerability. I get back in touch with one of my favorite vulnerability teachers, Bernie Brown, and I go back to one of her formulations, or at least a formulation I first learned from her. The story I'm telling myself is the story I'm telling myself about this country is and when I can do that, I can stand back from the story that I've inherited, the story that's been offered me. And I recognize it's just a story. And I can work past that mythology into the lived reality of people for whom America.

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Has been a story of suffering.

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I think this is primarily talking to us right now, talking to the spiritual community is primarily a spiritual challenge in the Buddhist sense of attachment that when we get attached to a particular perspective, especially inherent in story, especially if we are people of power and privilege within a society, that means we've been fed a lot of stories. And if we get attached to it.

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Eventually, then we contribute to suffering and we become deluded, which means that we do not see the full reality of what this country is.

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One of the really powerful teachers of this moment is Ibram X Kennedy, who is the director of the Anti Racist Policy Center at. I think I got that name right. His title at American University where he teaches. He talks about the history of racist ideas in this country and how it's been there since the beginning. I mean, just for one example, he talks about this thing that is offered up as if it was gospel, as if it was fact that black neighborhoods are more dangerous than white neighborhoods. There's more crime there. He said he believed this. He grew up believing this as an African-American man. He grew up believing this. But what his research tells him is that there are higher rates of crime regardless across racial lines in places where there is high employment, high unemployment and high levels of poverty. It's just that that tends to happen in more rural communities for white folks and it tends to happen in more urban communities for black folks. And yet, as a culture, we pay most attention and pathologies.

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Black violence sometimes ignoring outright white violence as well.

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To one of the frames that Kennedy uses that really strikes my heart very deeply is that this way of being acculturated into particular stories, lies we were told, or mythologies that don't serve the larger humanity. He refers to it as an addiction that he himself needed to wake up from. That really resonates with me, resonates with me as a person in long term recovery. I know what that inner lived experience of addiction from substance use is like.

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I know how it corrupted my will. My choices caused harm within my life and the lives of people that I knew.

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I also know how uncomfortable and how necessary it is to wake up from an addiction and enter that recovering path.

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A decade and a half down the line, almost into my own recovery. I am clear of this now. There's a whole bunch of causes and conditions, many of which had to do with my genetic heritage and family of origin and early life experiences that contributed to my addiction. I don't even like to call it my addiction a more. It's just addiction and

it's a fact of my life. What I am responsible for now after recognizing that. Is being able to respond the best I can so that the harms of addiction don't show up in my life anymore. I love that Kennedy says this is like an addiction because that waking up process to all these harmful ideas, stories that we inherited or we're taught. Maybe in a personal sense, they're not our responsibility. But the moment we notice we inherit them, then they become our responsibility to change and to recover from. And we can meet them, be on shutting down. Beyond fight flight, freezing all those forms of fragility. And instead we can do something else. One of James Baldwin's most famous quotes that is recounted here in this documentary when he says not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. This is a moment in which many of us, many of us of many different backgrounds and races, and especially those of us who are white, are waking up more now and trying to face what this country has been about and its history, its full history.

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There's a blog called Code Switch, which is written on the Washington Post Web site. And it is actually not a blog. She's me. It's a podcast. I apologize. It's a podcast that is run by journalists of color. And one of the things they've done recently in this age of post, George Floyd, this moment right now is they've asked white people to be honest about what's the difference this time? Why are you paying more attention? And they said folks were honest and vulnerable. And one person wrote this particular moment. They wrote during covered. I've also felt a physical vulnerability in the face of the virus that's made me more empathetic and shifted my priorities to some degree. In some ways, I think that increased vulnerability has also re-sensitized me towards images of violence against black bodies, which my privilege hadn't allowed me to tune out. To some degree before, this is part of what it is to take a fearless moral inventory of ourselves and of our culture and of our history. We don't have to be proud of the fact that we didn't notice it before or we didn't pay attention before. I am not proud of the fact I did not speak up at that baseball game. All those years ago.

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But instead of becoming fragile in the face of it, I can notice it can be honest about it and I can allow it to change my actions moving forward. And this brings me back to baseball and a particular holiday that is associated with baseball. I think we all have an invitation. To enter the space of this summer in a different way. In the face of what's happening in our country, and particularly with the holiday of July 4th coming up, it's real easy to fall into the mythologized story of America.

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At July 4th, just because that's kind of where the dominant energy tends to go. But instead, I want to set a challenge for me and for all of us, especially if we have white skin.

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To live this July 4th differently.

[00:21:02]

To tell and to share more honest stories about the history of this country, to recognize that this can be a moment of deeper integration into all of who we have been collectively.

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And to tell.

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And so in telling begin to live out a deeper, different, more wonderful story or the beginning of a more wonderful story of what this country might finally be able to be, because we are really maybe now reckoning with the fullness of our past and our white supremacy has in different ways.

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But for all of us, deformed our lives.

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For some of us, it's cost us our lives.

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For some of us, it's cost us our deeper connection with our own moral character, but it mis shapes all of us. And that brings me back to baseball. As I said, there may not be a baseball season this year. First, I really missed it. But actually now I'm totally OK with it because I know one of the things I like to do is I like to distract myself. And I love sports. But they can be such a distraction. And so I wonder this summer that this could be in this time of fearless moral inventory or at least the invitation to do it around race and racism and white supremacy, that this can be an opportunity to let go of those distractions and to face what needs to be faced so that it may be changed.

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So that's in the middle of this summer and the fireworks and the baseball and the July 4th, whatever that looks like this year in the midst of the pandemic, we might be able to say truly, finally realizing these words of another great American black writer.

[00:23:04]

Langston Hughes.

[00:23:07]

Let America be America again, the land that has not yet been. And yet might be the land where everyone is free.

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Amen, may you live in blessing.

[00:23:29]

I ask if you would please pray with me and join your heart with my. God of our hearts, deepest yearnings, known most fully to us in our lives, when our love expands, when our love is able to grow, when our love becomes all the more encompassing of the complexity and deep truth of our lives. May we all invite at this season, at this time of being alive? Invite you love into our hearts ever more fully. That you may radiate out through us with our actions and our words and our courage and that particularly at those moments in which we feel shut down or overwhelmed or feel that we cannot do the work that we would in that moment. Stop and pause and reacquaint ourselves with you love here in our lives right now.

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And draw strength and courage. Once again. To do the work before us.

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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